

VZCZCXRO5688
PP RUEHAST RUEHHM RUEHLN RUEHMA RUEHPB RUEHPOD RUEHTM RUEHTRO
DE RUEHEG #0138/01 0270903
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 270903Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1472
INFO RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAHLA/DEPT OF HOMELAND SECURITY WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 000138

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

NEA/ELA FOR SCHALL, ISN/CTR FOR KCHITTENDEN AND LHICKOCK,
ENERGY FOR RSALERNO

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [TBIO](#) [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [KFLU](#) [KSTH](#) [KSCA](#) [EAGR](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPT ENTERS THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF HIGH
CONTAINMENT LABS

1. (SBU) Summary and comment: Five Egyptian research organizations are planning to build Biosafety Level Three (BSL-3) laboratories in which they can work with indigenous or exotic agents like Rift Valley Fever and strains of highly pathogenic avian influenza (AI). Three of the groups, VSVRI, the state-subsidized animal vaccine monopoly, VACSERA, the state-owned human vaccine monopoly, and CLEVB, the GOE's animal vaccine regulator, have the financial wherewithal to build the labs. The other two groups-- the Ministries of Health and Population (MOHP) and Agriculture and Land Reclamation (MALR)-- have strong support from ministers who view BSL-3 labs as prestigious "must have" projects. None of the groups, however, are likely to be able to construct, let alone operate, a safe BSL-3 facility without U.S. technical assistance. All the organizations have received assistance from the U.S. Department of State's Biosecurity Engagement Program (BEP) and the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 3 (NAMRU-3). End summary and comment.

BIOSAFETY LEVEL 3 LABS CRITICAL LINK IN BIOSAFETY

2. (SBU) The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have published safety guidelines for labs that handle infectious microorganisms. These guidelines cover practices, equipment, and facilities (everything from access to drinking fountains), and they vary depending on the work to be done and the threat posed by the virus or bacteria involved. The guidelines speak in terms of biosafety levels 1, 2, 3, and 4-- the higher the number, the greater the risk, and the more demanding the precautions required to protect lab workers, the environment and the community. A BSL-3 lab is designed to safely handle agents which, when inhaled, may cause serious injury or death. NAMRU-3 currently operates the only BSL-3 lab in Egypt, although has the ability to upgrade to BSL-4 in less than 24 hours, if necessary.

THE EGYPTIAN BSL PLAYERS

3. (SBU) VSVRI, VACSERA and CLEVB may need BSL-3 facilities to do the work they plan to do, and they have the cash or the financing in place to proceed with the projects. The Ministry of Health and Population and Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation labs need BSL-3 facilities, but they do not have the financial wherewithal to proceed with construction at this time. VSVRI has broken ground and is expected to complete the first Egyptian-owned BSL-3 lab. At least two Egyptian universities also have BSL-3 aspirations: Ain Shams and Beni Sueif. Ain Shams has begun the process; sources

indicate it is probably 6 months to a year away from opening a BSL-3 lab. Beni Sueif has just begun the process, and its prospects for success are uncertain.

USG TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO DATE

¶4. (SBU) Biosecurity and counter-terrorism experts agree that bioterrorism is a critical threat to US security, and insecure labs around the world are a major part of the problem. Three separate groups, the National Intelligence Council, Britain's IPPR Commission on National Security in the 21st Century, and the Graham Commission, published reports in late 2008 echoing these concerns. Against this backdrop, the USG has rendered considerable technical assistance to each of the five Egyptian organizations seeking to build BSL-3 labs.

¶5. (SBU) In late July 2008, representatives of all five Egyptian groups traveled to Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to participate in a BEP-sponsored training program, entitled "Controlling Laboratory Biorisks," at Sandia. The training, which ended August 4, 2008, included a trip to Colorado State University's new BSL-3 facility in Ft. Collins.

¶6. (SBU) In mid-November 2008, representatives from six USG Agencies (DOS, USDA, HHS-CDC, DOE-Sandia, DOD-NAMRU-3 and the FBI) met with the Egyptian organizations pursuing BSL-3 labs in al-Ain al-Sokhna, Egypt for a BEP-sponsored BSL-3

CAIRO 00000138 002 OF 003

Planning, Programming and Operations Workshop. The participants discussed their BSL plans and agreed on the importance of a culture of biosecurity, risk assessments tailored to Egypt's particular situation, international support, a national strategy, training, and national standards. Participants agreed MOHP and MALR needed BSL-3 capabilities to deal with emerging infectious diseases and needed US technical assistance to build and operate high containment labs. Some participants, while grateful for NAMRU-3's support, stressed the need for Egyptian-owned BSL-3 facilities. After the workshop, BEP conducted follow-up visits to MOHP, MALR, VACSERA and VSVRI. A BEP representative also met with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and briefed the Ministry on BEP's activities in Egypt.

¶7. (SBU) Sandia, BEP and NAMRU-3 continue to work with the Egyptian organizations on risk assessments, assessments none of the organizations had undertaken prior to the meeting in Sokhna. Additionally, Dr. Mohamed Khalifa of MALR has agreed to spearhead the creation of the Egyptian Biosafety Association. BEP may fund this effort.

EGYPT: CROSSROADS FOR PANDEMIC DISEASES

¶8. (SBU) MOHP's Central Health Laboratories are located just a few blocks from the American Embassy in Cairo. Dr. Hala Esmat, the Director of the laboratories, makes a compelling case for BSL-3 capability. Her laboratories routinely handle AI and Rift Valley Fever viruses and other dangerous pathogens. The labs storage cabinets contain these viruses as well as anthrax bacteria and other "select agents." She and her team are very concerned about AI and Rift Valley Fever, which are endemic here, and the possible entry of these and other diseases from Sudan, Libya and elsewhere. As Esmat put it, "We live in a dangerous neighborhood." Esmat told us MOHP Minister Hatem El-Gabaly ordered her to build a BSL-3 lab and told her the resources would be available to do so. Dr. Nasr El-Sayid, the Minister's closest advisor, told ESTHoff that BSL-3 capability would further burnish MOHP's reputation as the go-to lab for certain African and the

Middle Eastern countries that rely on MOHP's reputation for discretion. He said he routinely receives requests from neighboring countries to conduct confidential lab tests on samples.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: MOHP is a long way from being able to construct and run a BSL-3 lab. Despite the Minister's commitment to the project, there is no evidence the money is available. Esmat also lacks a strong supporting team. End Comment.

MIN. OF AGRICULTURE: "WE ARE THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE."

¶10. (SBU) MALR, like MOHP, stakes a strong claim for BSL-3 capabilities. In the words of Dr. Mohamed Khalifa Hassan, Technical Manager for the Central Laboratory for Veterinary Quality Control on Poultry Production (CLQP), Egypt is Europe's backyard, and MALR is the West's first line of defense against pandemic threats including AI and Rift Valley Fever. AI has killed 23 of the 52 Egyptians it has afflicted to date, and Rift Valley Fever killed 200 of the 400 Egyptians it struck during the last outbreak in 2003. Both these diseases are endemic in Egypt. MALR currently operates two laboratories: the Animal Health Research Institute (AHRI) and CLPQ. According Dr. Mona Ali, the Director of the labs, MALR Minister Amin Abaza is committed to building a BSL-3 lab at its central Cairo facility and, if the financing can be arranged, a separate BSL-3 facility at the Agricultural Research Center outside of Cairo that will be able to handle large animals.

STATUS OF ONGOING PROJECTS

¶11. (SBU) The Veterinary Serum and Vaccine Research Institute (VSVRI), the GOE-backed animal vaccine monopoly located in Abbasia near NAMRU-3, has the ready cash (\$8 million) to build a Foot and Mouth (F&M)vaccine production facility incorporating BSL-3 capabilities and the additional resources

CAIRO 00000138 003 OF 003

(\$4.5 million) needed to refurbish an existing AI facility to include a BSL-3 area. VSVRI has contracted with Atlas Construction Company to build the F&M plant and construction is underway. VSVRI's Deputy Director, Dr. Adel Azab, is determined to incorporate BSL-3 capabilities into VSVRI's facilities.

¶12. (SBU) VSVRI's next-door-neighbor, the Central Laboratory for Evaluation of Veterinary Biologics (CLEVB), has also taken a few steps toward establishing a BSL-3 facility. CLEVB is the GOE's gatekeeper for all would-be animal vaccines. It tests all imported and locally-produced animal vaccines for safety and efficacy. No animal vaccine is used in this country without CLEVB's seal of approval. CLEVB has begun to renovate space in its Abbasia facility, which is located adjacent to VSVRI. Dr. Elham El-Ebiary, CLEVB's Director, told ESTHoff CLEVB has secured a credit line of 8 million Egyptian pounds (LE) from the Islamic Development Bank.

¶13. (SBU) In a visit to CLEVB late last year, ESTHoff was allowed to inspect CLEVB's poultry vaccine challenge test area, which is located in the building's basement. Several trials were underway involving chickens and ducks in several different rooms. There was little effort to comply with biosafety standards. The rooms were not sealed. The stench in the hallway was overpowering. The facility appeared to be unsuitable for a BSL-3 lab.

¶14. (SBU) The Holding Company for Biological Products and Vaccines (VACSERA) in Agouza, Giza, the Ministry of Finance's human vaccine monopoly, is taking a more cautious approach to BSL-3. Of all the entities pursuing the BSL-3 Holy Grail,

VACSERA, with its 4,200 employees, \$100 million in annual sales, state-of-the-art production facilities, Ministry of Finance backing, and strong management, seems to be the best positioned to build a BSL-3 lab. MOHP Minister El-Gabaly recently announced that the GOE was increasing its efforts to produce an AI vaccine effective against a pandemic virus before any outbreak, a so-called "pre-pandemic" vaccine. Dr. Abdul Rahman Shahin, MOHP's spokesperson, has confirmed that VACSERA is tasked to work on a human H5N1 vaccine project. VACSERA welcomes USG help with BSL efforts.

NEXT STEPS: A BRAVE NEW WORLD

115. (SBU) Comment: The USG's efforts in support of BSL-3 projects in Egypt have generated an enormous amount of goodwill with the groups who want to build the labs, and the ministries involved. Representatives of the five Egyptian groups have repeatedly expressed their appreciation for this support, and the groups have granted BEP unfettered access to their plans and their facilities. Embassy Cairo, including NAMRU-3, strongly supports the BEP initiatives here. In the interest of biosafety and enhancing our cooperation with key governmental and academic entities, the USG should continue to make every effort to insure that the BSL-3 labs are built and run safely and securely.
SCOBAY